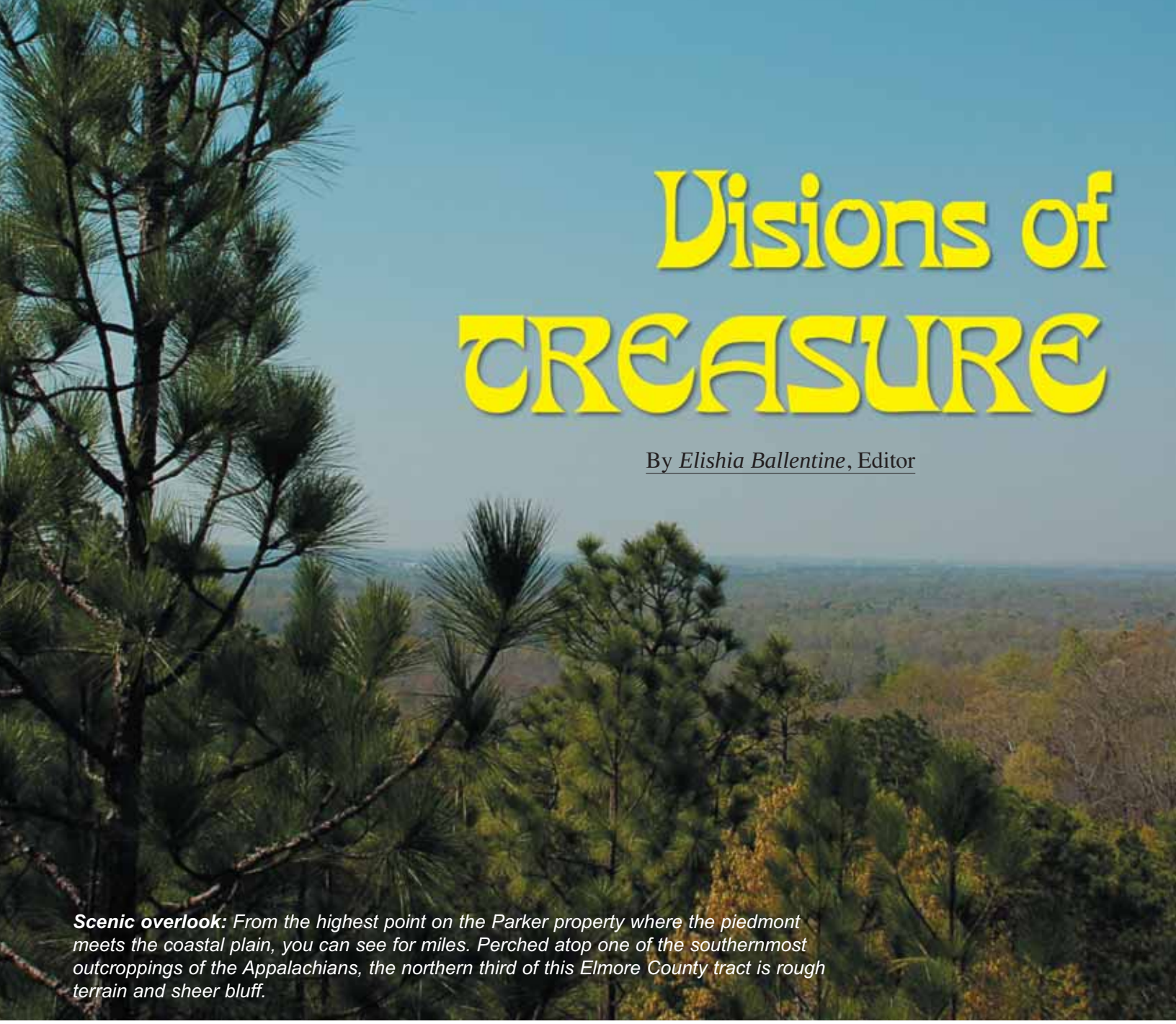

Visions of TREASURE

By *Elishia Ballentine*, Editor

Scenic overlook: *From the highest point on the Parker property where the piedmont meets the coastal plain, you can see for miles. Perched atop one of the southernmost outcroppings of the Appalachians, the northern third of this Elmore County tract is rough terrain and sheer bluff.*

Why would anyone who already owned a certified TREASURE Forest want to trade it for a piece of barren land on the opposite side of the county? Surely not just for the sake of hard work and starting over . . . could it be the challenge of turning it into something beautiful, perhaps another TREASURE? That's exactly what Dr. Robert Parker did in 1989 when he obtained 360 acres through a "land swap."

Such an undertaking requires vision. Dr. Parker had that vision. He had faith that he could also transform this new property into a TREASURE Forest.

Originally he owned a TREASURE Forest in the Holtville/Slapout vicinity more commonly known as Beat 14 in Elmore County. He concedes that it was good land, but it just didn't have the "character" of this place situated along the banks of the Tallapoosa River between Wetumpka and Tallassee.

This ground is unique: located on the river, it was inhabited by Creek Indians and their predecessors for thousand of years. During the era of Andrew Jackson, the old Indian boundary ran right through the middle of the property. Dr. Parker has found arrowheads and relics as a reminder of those historical times, as well as a piece of railroad track from a narrow gauge that hauled logs, probably around the turn of the 20th century.

Typical of much of Elmore County, the piedmont meets the coastal plain here, lending to diverse topography. Being at the very southern tip of the Appalachians, the northern third of the tract is rough terrain and sheer bluff. There are two creeks that run on either side of the property, and approximately one-half mile fronts the river. In the bottomland nearest the river on the south, there were roughly 200 acres of flat cotton fields with just a few scrubby trees when he first purchased it. Four years later he added 60 acres; then in 2003 he bought 120 more.

Immediately beginning a timber management program, he planted the first trees in 1991. Since there were already

so many wide open spaces, he started with wildlife corridors. The wildlife had no where to go for cover in all the cotton fields, so he planted strips of trees to make it "wildlife friendlier." Today there are 40 acres in wildlife openings which include 25 food plots and dove fields. There are also about 10 acres in native grasses.

He didn't want just a pine plantation, he desired diversity. Dr. Parker says he reckons he has planted at least 100,000 trees since those early days, and has had good luck with everything except pecan and chestnut. Now he estimates that there are 40-50 acres in hardwoods (mostly oaks and ash) and approximately 80 acres in pines. Although there are only 10 acres of longleaf in a particularly sandy area – with mostly loblolly and a few slash everywhere else – he says if he had it to do over again, he'd plant all of it in longleaf. He has also planted roughly 4,000 cypress trees which do extremely well in this soil.

The primary objective of this TREASURE Forest is wildlife, with the secondary objective being timber. Aesthetics become more important as the years go by. According to Dr. Parker, "There is no joy found in the dollars made from timber . . . real joy comes from seeing turkeys or deer standing in a field of wildflowers . . . enjoying the beauty of the land with family and friends . . . riding around . . . planting things and watching them grow. You cannot put a price on a wildflower . . . you can't sell 'em or put an amount of money on the pleasure they give."

If you've ever talked to Dr. Parker or spent any time with him, you've heard him explain that it's the force that drives him: "Most people die with the music still in them." It's his life philosophy and he hopes to inspire others to action by it . . . "Quit being a spectator. Get up off the couch, do something with your life . . . quit watching television . . . get out and do something!"

It seems to be a common premise among many TREASURE Forest owners, and it's no different for this 2005 Helene Mosley Memorial Award winner for the Southeast Region: trees are worth more if you plant them yourself. Dr. Parker continued, "Sure, you can pay someone to plant trees or build a house for you, but if you do it yourself or with your family, it takes on a whole new significance. Anyone with enough money can create a TREASURE Forest, but it means so much more if you do it yourself. The main thing is 'doing' it – building a cabin with your own hands gives it more value."

In fact, build it himself is exactly what Dr. Parker has done. He started the cabin six years ago, and it is still a work in progress. Inside the cabin there's a nice wood-burning stove and a gorgeous corner hearth, made of Tennessee field stone which he laid himself. He lovingly built the stairs and banisters from trees right there on the property, remembering where each one actually stood before he cut it. The four bedrooms on the bottom floor are each finished in a different wood: cherry, red oak, cypress, and cedar.

Photo by Elishia Ballentine

The Tallapoosa River flows alongside the southern boundary of this Elmore County property.

As a result of his retirement, he's able to stay "focused" on the jobs at hand. At the time of this interview, he was getting ready to conduct a prescribed burn, which he carries out every two or three years in all the pine stands. Although his sons help occasionally, he actually does most of the work: bush hogging, planting trees, and building fences. He doesn't hire anyone, although he credits and appreciates the willingness to help of agencies such as the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

There's no electricity on the farm . . . they use a solar system for power. There's only well water; he declares that there is no better water anywhere in Alabama. Located a couple miles off the main highway, at the end of the road and two locked gates, he calls it the "hideout." That's actually part of the attraction – although he goes there to get away from everything, he doesn't want to live there full-time. A retired veterinarian, Dr. Parker receives satisfaction in "just piddlin' around." In addition to all his chores on the farm, he takes pleasure –

(Continued on page 6)

Photo by Elishia Ballentine

Diversity at the farm is illustrated in the variety of this photo: Longleaf pines planted in 1997, a row of autumn olive, a wildlife corridor, sawtooth oaks planted in 1996, and loblolly pines planted in 2002.

Photo by Elishia Ballentine

Once upon a time, all the land was cotton fields . . . now pines trees and sawtooth oaks create wildlife corridors that look like grand avenues.

and is very talented – in woodworking. Using an adz, he creates or "chops" wooden bowls with his hands. This hobby keeps him busy, and has taken him on many journeys to woodworking workshops. As a result, he states that when he looks at a tree, he not only admires its beauty, but also wonders, "How many bowls are in that tree???"

Although Mrs. Betsy Parker likes coming out to the farm as well, she admits that her main delight comes from watching her husband pour his life into it. "It's fun to watch him enjoy it. He puts a lot of hours and love into this place, and it gives him a sense of accomplishment."

The Parkers have five children (four boys and a girl) with ten grandchildren. The whole family enjoys the farm, but only a couple of them actually hunt. When they first bought the property, there were no deer. There were no bedding areas, no edge. Since it was mostly cotton fields, there were no turkeys either. Things have changed considerably over the last decade. Today there is an abundance of deer and turkey with plenty of squirrels, rabbits, and doves as well.

In addition to the acorns from 2000 oak trees and chestnuts for deer, he plants green fields, clover, corn, soybeans, and chufa. There are also autumn olives and berries for turkeys and quail.

Dr. Parker participates in a deer management program, mostly to support the program, but also to get input. When family and friends hunt, they are selective on the size of deer taken. Not only have they seen an improvement in the quantity of deer, but also the quality; size of the bucks has increased dramatically.

The newest addition to the wildlife menagerie is ducks that have just arrived in the last year or so. He experimented with bees for a while, so there are still a few beehives here and there. With the close proximity to the Tallapoosa, he occasionally sees beavers and even alligators.

While traveling to Ireland and Scotland in 1993, Dr. Parker observed a forest management tool that no one here at home was using at the time: tree shelters. He was sold on the idea and over the next couple years began employing them (mostly with sawtooth oak), estimating that he has used over 2,000 since then with tremendous success. Claiming that he is the biggest danger to the forest, one of the personal benefits he's discovered is that tree shelters save the trees from him and his bush hog! He noted that the main disadvantages of the technique are the ants and wasps that inhabit them.

When the Parkers hosted the landowner tour during the state-wide Landowner/TREASURE Forest Conference in 2000, he provided a demonstration of the advantages of tree shelters. He planted some trees using them and a few without, and stated that people could definitely see the difference in the growth of the trees.

Additionally, the Parker farm has been the site for several other educational tours, as well as Outdoor Women events. Wildlife and diversity are evident across the property, but no where better than in the Tree Identification Area with over 100 species of trees planted on 4-5 acres, including 25 different varieties of oaks. Both archaeology and abundant wildflowers provide interest as well.

Believing that the greatest value of the TREASURE Forest program is that it gives one a goal or vision to improve the land, an ideal he hopes to instill in his grandchildren. Just as some people buy an old run-down house, fix it up, sell it, then move on to another one . . . Dr. Parker says if he were younger, he would love to buy up neglected land and plant trees. He believes he could make a TREASURE Forest out of any land!

He definitely has the vision for TREASURE.

Photo by Elishia Ballentine

Dr. Robert Parker stands beside a couple of live oaks he planted in 1996, which are more often seen in coastal areas of Alabama.